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ABSTRACT

This project explores the use of narrative to mediate the delivery of information on the effects of harmful discrimination in a simulated environment that is intended to arouse empathy and inspire reflection. It focuses on the potential of instructional narrative simulation to change biased beliefs about homosexuality. "This just is!" Jeff's Story is an instructional development project that utilizes narrative simulation as a strategy for affective learning. It focuses on enhancing empathetic abilities, stimulating self-reflection, fueling group discussion, and offering opportunity for reconstruction of storied biases. Initially developed as a paper and pencil exercise, it has been evaluated through expert review and user testing, and is currently being developed into an interactive multimedia program. Jeff's Story has been field tested with a variety of users in both the original pencil and paper format and as an interactive multimedia program. Overall user feedback indicated that the experience stimulated continued thinking and discussion. Since reflection is a necessary activity for reconstructing biased beliefs, such feedback offers hope that this instruction experience, at least, can create the possibility of changing biased beliefs over time. Appendices present an image of the opening splash screen from the interactive multimedia program and a sample Internet resource link screen. (Contains 41 references.) (AEF)

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Affecting Socially Constructed Beliefs through Narrative Simulation

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Abstract

Bias and discrimination based on the differences of others is a serious contemporary problem. Biased beliefs often lead to harmful discriminatory action and inhibit emotional and cognitive development. Immense human potential is lost by the silencing of difference through hate speech, assault, and murder. Such beliefs also serve as perceptual screens that constrict imagination, limit experience, and diminish the possibilities of constructing useful meaning regarding difference (Greene, 1995). As barriers to new information, varied perspectives, and construction of meaning, these perceptual screens are particularly restrictive in educational settings. However, certain specifically designed instructional processes may offer significant opportunity for learners to develop empathy, reflect on their own biases, and reconstruct stereotypical stories about the differences of others. This project explores the use of narrative to mediate the delivery of information on the effects of harmful discrimination in a simulated environment that is intended to arouse empathy and inspire reflection. It focuses on the potential of instructional narrative simulation to change biased beliefs about homosexuality.

Affecting Socially Constructed Beliefs through Narrative Simulation

Introduction

Contemporary theories of psychology and philosophy recognize more than ever the inseparable relationship of thoughts and feelings in human mind (Martin & Reigeluth, 1999). Human activity cannot be adequately understood without consideration of both affective and rational functioning. Yet, aesthetic, emotional, ethical, and social development are all too often ignored in the design and evaluation of instructional programs.

Many recent events, such as the Columbine High School massacre, have sparked painful examination of education's failure to emphasize the more qualitative aspects of human learning and development. We are also faced with similarly horrifying residual affects of violent hate crimes in this country. For instance, the torture and murder of Matthew Shepard, because he was gay, sparked actions that continue to reach beyond the initial horror. Shortly after his murder a college fraternity made light of this crime by displaying an effigy of Matthew on their homecoming float. A minister and some of his parishioners demonstrated at Shepard's funeral with signs claiming that such punishment was appropriate for homosexuals. Even now, nearly a year and a half after his death, a Christian Internet site displays animated flames surrounding a photograph of Matthew Shepard while flashing the number of days he continues to burn in hell for the sin of homosexuality.[1]

Biased beliefs about difference, whether related to ability, class, culture, race, or sexual orientation, are increasingly problematic as the face of America changes. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, non-ethnic European Americans, currently 72% of the population of this country,

[1] http://216.71.100.163/memorial.html

will decline to 53% by the year 2050 (January, 2000). Increasing cultural diversity and widespread fear and hatred of difference are creating a potentially explosive environment. The prevalence of such attitudes may indicate the need for more holistic paradigms of education that include less prescriptive and more innovative methods of design, delivery, and evaluation of instruction.

While affective learning is not new to American education, there has been little focus on actual design and evaluation of such instructional products. In a recent review of related resources it was apparent that, while much theoretical work has been done on affective domain learning, little exists in the way of instructional strategies and processes for changing attitudes about difference. For example, one curriculum resource list includes 153 entries consisting of guides for teachers and administrators, discussion articles, pamphlets, activity books, films, recordings, and numerous children's books, none of which appear to include actual strategies for affective learning.[2] The Cambridge Friends' School in Cambridge, MA recently circulated an impressive list of children's books on gay and lesbian families. The Southern Poverty and Law Center supports distribution of teacher guides, workbooks, and lesson plans on racism. And Rethinking Schools Ltd. distributes teaching materials on issues of equity and social justice.[3] While these supplemental content materials are important resources, they often lack the instructional design and evaluation necessary for changing biased beliefs about difference.

Project Description

"This just is!" Jeff's Story is an instructional development project that utilizes narrative simulation as a strategy for affective learning. While incorporating many resources similar to

[2] ERIC #ED280626

[3] www.rethinkingschools.org

those identified above, it focuses on enhancing empathic abilities, stimulating self-reflection, fueling group discussion, and offering opportunity for reconstruction of storied biases. Initially developed as a paper and pencil exercise, it has been evaluated through expert review and user testing. Jeff's Story is currently being developed into an interactive multimedia program.

As an instructional strategy, narrative simulation serves to involve the learner as a character in an unfolding tale. Jeff's Story was refined from a true story as told by the mother of an adolescent struggling with discovering his homosexual orientation.[4] The parent and professional version is designed to involve the users in the role of Jeff's parents by offering dilemmas, decision points, and answer choices throughout the exercise. Learners are faced with difficult decisions that may have serious consequences. These decision points are followed by a range of possible answer choices, including helpful answers, biased answers, and ones that may be harmful to the adolescent in the story. This decision making process is employed to generate self-reflection and imagination. It is also designed to offer users opportunity to identify their own biases and reconstruct the storied origins of those beliefs. Interactive links to historical accounts, news articles, and resources are included throughout the program to inform users on issues related to homosexuality. Sound, imagery, and concern for space, color, and symbolic elements are employed as aesthetic mediators to enhance the learning experience. While users are encouraged to focus on following the story, they may explore additional information in any sequence they choose, including Internet links that are embedded in the program. Design control is concentrated on elements of space and environment leaving time and sequence to user discretion. This shift in control-by-design is intended to enhance the emotional experience of the user and emphasize the affective goals of this instructional composition.

[4] http://members.tripod.com/~claytoly

Conceptualizing the Design of Instruction to Eliminate Bias and Discrimination

As barriers to new information and varied perspectives, biased beliefs and attitudes inhibit emotional and cognitive development by serving as perceptual screens that constrict imagination, limit experience, and diminish the possibility of constructing useful meaning regarding difference (Greene, 1995; Zinchenko, 1997). Martin and Reigeluth (1999) echo this perspective in saying that affective learning in the form of emotional growth is both a "…foundation for and a component of cognitive development" (In Reigeluth, p. 489). However, until recently few affective learning models existed within the field of instructional design and technology (Kamradt & Kamradt, 1999; Martin & Reigeluth, 1999).

Two exciting instructional programs, developed over the past ten years, have inspired and strongly influenced the development of Jeff's Story. The Common Thread Case Project is an impressive example of instructional design that seeks to inspire independent thinking and develop decision-making skill in pre-service and practicing teachers (Bliss & Mazur, 1996; 1998; 2000). Rather than conventional *best practice* models of teacher training, the Common Thread Project offers opportunity for users to consider true story cases of teachers in the midst of educational reform. The strategy revolves around consideration and discussion of how users might solve dilemmas presented in the cases. It is an interactive hypermedia design that allows users to control time and sequence in navigation. Another important instructional design effort that inspired and guided the development of Jeff's Story is a project for use in farm and industrial safety programs (Cole, 1993; 1997). Cole relies heavily on cognitive psychology (Bruner, 1986, 1996; Sperry, 1993), theories of instructional narrative (Fisher, 1995; Howard, 1991; Sarbin, 1986), and research on human memory (Neisser, 1978; Schacter & Tulving, 1994) in the

development of narrative simulations to change attitudes regarding safety practices in mining and farming. While the design of Jeff's Story is inspired by the work of these researchers, it is distinctive in focusing specifically on changing biased beliefs as a source of discriminatory action. Since such beliefs are socially constructed, the development of Jeff's Story also incorporates theoretical perspectives from culture studies (Geertz, 1983; Peshkin, 1991), critical social theory (hooks, 1994; Merry, 1990; Yngvesson, 1993), critical race theory (Matsuda, et.al., 1993), moral education (Appiah & Gutmann, 1996; Ayers, et.al., 1998; Colesante, & Biggs, 1999; Kohlberg, 1971; Vitz, 1990), and queer theory (Capper, 1999; Rhoads, 1994; Tierney, 1997). Additionally, the storied nature of biased beliefs, as well as particular interest in the instructional qualities of the creative arts, provided the basis for also including certain perspectives on human perception and aesthetics (Greene, 1988; 1995; 1998).

One of the most useful frameworks for understanding and articulating the design of Jeff's Story is a conceptual model for affective development that appears in Volume II of Reigeluth's Instructional-Design Theories and Models, published in 1999. This model includes six dimensions of affective development and three identified components of each dimension. The dimensions are emotional, moral, social, spiritual, aesthetic, and motivational. Martin and Reigeluth (p. 485-509) identify the components for each dimension as knowledge, skills, and attitudes. They stress that the model is incomplete, serving only as a beginning in the field of instructional design to address affective development, by including a fourth component labeled as *other* to emphasize that the model is a work in progress. Jeff's Story includes mediating elements for most of the six dimensions defined by Martin & Reigeluth. For instance, the conceptual model describes the knowledge component of emotional development as "knowing others experience the same emotions you do, such as joy and anger (p. 493)." Jeff's Story

employs true story narrative in a simulated environment as means to inspire empathic understanding and encourage group discussion.

The instructional model for affective development (Martin & Reigeluth, 1999) identifies and supports a majority of the conceptual foundations for Jeff's Story. However, Jeff's Story includes the additional dimension of human activity that appears to be overlooked by Martin and Reigeluth. Activity theory offers concepts for describing human activity and includes the central notion of mediation (Nardi, 1997; Wertsch, 1998). It is concerned with action rather than behavior, relying on concepts of potentiality and intent. As such activity theory provides a helpful conceptual frame for articulating the relationship between internal mental activity and external material action.

Empathy, Reflection, and Story Reconstruction as Instructional Outcomes

As early as 1978 experimental research concluded that in order to promote cooperation among interracial groups a dimension of affect must be introduced into the group experience. Cook (1978) found that subjects in a laboratory environment associated positive interracial experiences with exceptional individuals instead of interaction with the larger group. Only after some affective dimension was added to the cooperative experience did members of the group exhibit empathy for others who were racially different. Didactic information and discussion of differences alone had no impact on the development of empathic understanding. This study is important for the design of instruction to affect biased beliefs because it emphasizes the interrelationship of affective mediators, empathic understanding, and cooperation. It also demonstrates the feasibility of creating instructional environments that are analogous to real world learning settings. "*This just is*!" Jeff's Story employs true story narrative and simulation design to create experiences that are analogous to those in the real world. It involves learners in

actual dilemmas and decisions to increase the likelihood that users will identify personally with the story.

Beliefs are constructed in memory as storied truths. Reconstruction of beliefs requires a process of reflection. Jeff's Story is designed to engender reflection through dilemmas that users are asked to resolve by choosing certain answers among a range of answer choices. Once an answer is chosen a new screen appears that offers a discussion of that answer choice. Continuing on with the narrative, users discover how Jeff's parents responded and the resulting consequences. In order to further stimulate reflection the exercise is followed by a group discussion focused on comparison and explanation of answer choices. This process of comparing one's own responses to those of other users is intended to encourage learners to examine their own beliefs. Discussion of varying responses among members of the group is crucial in providing a generative experience that may eventually lead to examination of familial and social origins of biased beliefs.

Human beings make meaning of the events in their lives by associating those events with existing understandings. These schemas are dominant mechanisms for restructuring memories and recall is distorted to fit existing schema (Anderson, et.al., 1996). The process of making meaning is an activity that is limited by previously associated meanings held in one's mind (Polkinghorne, 1988). Jeff's Story provides dissonance and contradiction by creating space for discussion of varying opinions on emotionally charged topics. Such dissonance is an internal imbalance that causes learners to seek new understandings as a way to restore cognitive equilibrium (Piaget, 1970). These newly acquired understandings can be seen as objects of expanded potential in individual mental processing (Zinchenko, 1997). An even more disturbing aspect of this simulation is Jeff's suicide. Despite all their efforts to support and encourage him,

Jeff's parents were unable to prevent his death. Learners are left to struggle with what they might have done differently. Such a disturbing end offers potential to extend reflection beyond actual instructional time and space. In other words, the instructional experience sets the stage for new possibilities. This potential is a single entity of time and space that serves as a means to new activity (Zinchenko, 1997).

Proof of Concept

Jeff's Story has been field tested with a variety of users in both the original pencil and paper format and as an interactive multimedia program. Prior to user testing the exercise was reviewed by a variety of experts who made editorial suggestions. This advice generally focused on changes in the wording of questions, adding answer choices, and revising some of the didactic information. After working the exercise for the first time, several of these experts reacted with strong emotional statements. They were upset that the story ended with Jeff's suicide or thought that the exercise could be hurtful to certain users. Some of the most thoughtful suggestions came from the woman who wrote the original story of her own son's suicide. She was able to provide feedback to assure the fidelity and veracity of the distilled narrative. Revisions based on these reviews were incorporated before the paper and pencil exercise was tested with potential users.

Initial field-testing was completed with fourteen adults, including parents, ministers, and married or single professionals who had no children of their own. The objective was to obtain information on: a) veracity, b) usability, c) group discussion, and c) relevance of the didactic information presented in the exercise. Evaluations were completed immediately following the exercise and several weeks later. The results reflected that 86% felt the story was real, 93% felt the instructions were easy to follow, and the same percentage said it was useful to hear viewpoints of others during the group discussion. Additionally, 71% felt the group discussion

caused them to rethink some of their own answers and almost half indicated that the questions were difficult for them to answer. These results reinforced the importance of maintaining group discussion as an integral part of the learning process.

Five user tests have been completed on the multimedia version of Jeff's Story. The concern in these tests was to obtain user feedback regarding navigational links, general usability, and average time to work through the simulation. These users included four females and one male, ranging in age from 33 years to 55 years. Straight, gay and bisexual identities were represented and the group included two parents. Computer skills ranged from novice to expert and it took an average of 25 minutes to complete the simulation. The most helpful feedback here was related to navigation, affective reactions, and content suggestions. First, as expected, many internal and Internet links did not function properly. For example, one user pointed out that the first two screens indicated the main link would be found centered at the bottom of the screen but it was located on the global navigation bar on the left of the screen throughout the rest of the program. This and all other navigational problems were quite easy to correct. While such feedback was extremely important in the development process, the user comments regarding the overall program were enlightening and reiterated much of the user feedback on the paper and pencil version. Most of the negative responses revolved around the answer choices. Users indicated they had difficulty choosing only one answer and some felt it was not clear enough in the instructions that they could choose as many answers as they wished. One user didn't like any of the answer choices for two of the questions and offered suggestions for additional responses to those dilemmas. These users felt generally positive about the experience and several indicated the experience provoked reflection and discussion with friends and family members. One user had a

very strong emotional reaction to the suicide. She said it surprised her and that it could have been prevented.

Overall user feedback indicated that the experience stimulated continued thinking and discussion. Since reflection is a necessary activity for reconstructing biased beliefs, such feedback offers hope that this instructional experience, at least, can create the possibility of changing biased beliefs over time. In fact, most of the information collected thus far reinforces the theoretical foundations on which this project is built.

Summary

Can instructional narrative stimulate open discussion of homophobia? Will such discussion cause significant reflection on the nature and origin of negative beliefs about homosexuality? To what extent will such reflection result in the reconstruction of stereotypical stories about difference? "*This just is*!" Jeff's Story is unique as an instructional product that combines affective learning with contemporary social problems in an attempt to answer such questions.

Although much research has been done in social psychology and human learning, the application of such discourse to the design and evaluation of educational products that are specifically focused on biased beliefs about difference is rare. As early as 1954, Gordon Allport called for "militant tolerance" or the need for citizens to become intolerant of intolerance. Yet, in his historical study of the Holocaust, Browning (1992) concluded that the urge to conform was the underpinning that allowed 500 working class German men, with no particular interest in Nazi dogma, to murder nearly 40,000 Polish Jews and send another 45,000 to their deaths in Treblinka.

In the United States legal remedies, educational policy, behavioral approaches, and didactic curriculum materials seem to have little impact on attitudes about difference. The urge to conform is reiterated in numerous accounts of the torture and murder of homosexuals and African Americans. While mere tolerance of difference may be possible through behavioral approaches, legal mandates, and educational policies, independent thinking and valuing difference require mental activities such as reflection and empathy. Such mental activities empower and enable *militant tolerance* and dialogue about difference.

This project focuses on discriminatory action as rooted in biased belief, biased belief as socially constructed in narrative form, and narrative as an aesthetic mediator to promote critical thinking and affective change. It uses narrative simulation to enhance perception of the present and stimulate imagination of possibilities and potential (Greene, 1995). Human beings have both the necessity and potential to embrace and enjoy differences. Such potential can be mediated through instructional tools that stimulate new mental activity.

This instructional program is aimed at homophobia because fear and hatred of people who are gay remains largely condoned and openly expressed in contemporary society. While biased beliefs of a racist or sexist nature are also prevalent, open expression of those is widely discouraged. The urge to conform to social norms often results in much more subtle expressions of racist or sexist biases. Therefore, initial focus on homophobia appears to have more potential to engender open discussion and reflection. The vision, however, is to gain insight through the development and evaluation of Jeff's Story that will assist in designing instructional programs focused on a range of biased beliefs.

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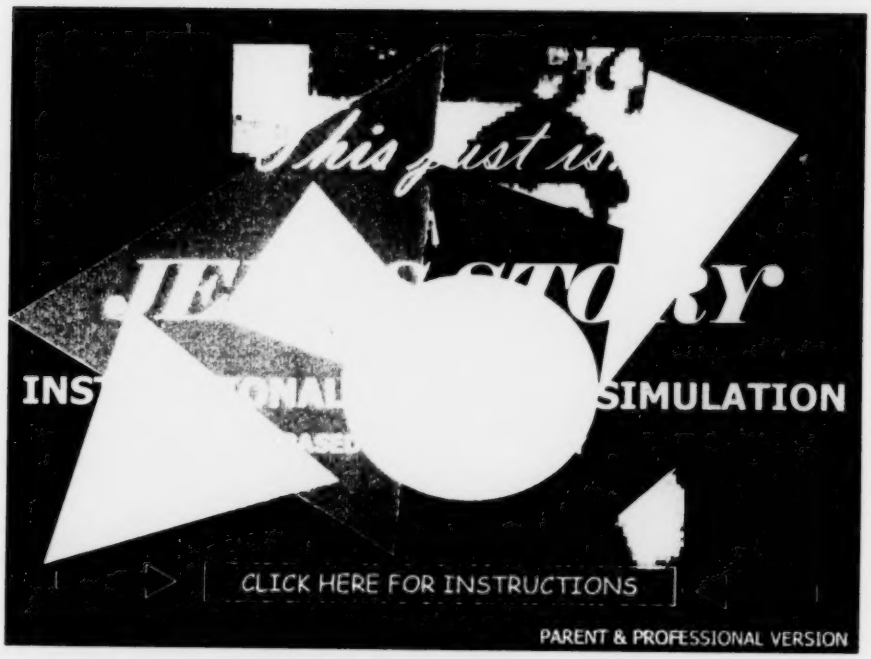
Appendix A



Opening splash screen from interactive multimedia program

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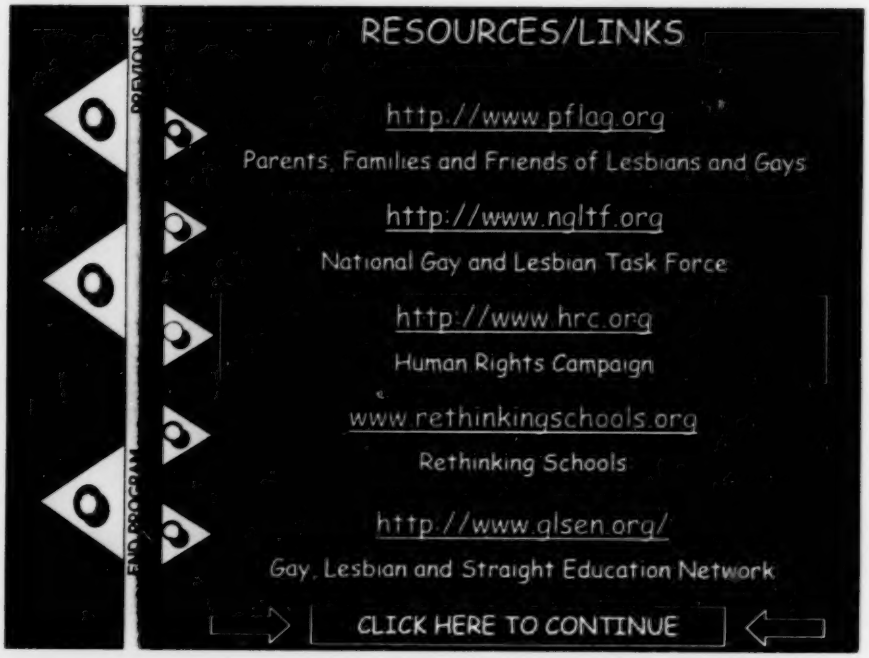
Appendix B



Sample Internet resource link screen

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